

Five preliminary takes on Brexit

The result of the UK vote on the Leave/Remain referendum requires a serious and articulated analysis of an event which for the first time is bound to lead a long time member state to leave the European Union. The following synthetic considerations are just the beginning of an analysis and will hopefully stimulate a broader debate.

1. *It is not the economy stupid! It is politics.* While the economic components of popular discontent behind the “Leave” vote are obviously important, the response was not framed in economic but in political terms (independence, return to sovereignty, closing of the borders, flag, etc.). Against such a position the “economic rationalists” (and the fewer cosmopolitans) were defeated. Identitarians won. The defenders of the status quo (Remain) had framed their position essentially in economic terms (the risks of being out, the advantages of being in) and did not provide any convincing political response taking seriously into consideration the popular request for having some “control” in front of the current problems. They discovered at their expenses that politics ruled.
2. *It is not (only) about the UK it is about US (the EU remaining states and citizens)!*
The decision of a big and important member to leave the EU is not only something that concerns that country (and raises a number of problems concerning the negotiation of the exit), it is a shattering negative vote against the Union from inside. After a long series of positive “votes” for the Union from outside (all the new accessions of the last twenty years and the pending demands) this is an important reversal that inevitably must open a soul searching debate in the EU. Will the Union be able to keep its members in the future or the UK is just the first of a series of exits?
3. *The representation gap continues to hit.* A lot of people (with their problems) do not feel well represented in the EU and in spite of the fact that their trust in national institutions is low they are more ready to turn “national” when the game gets tough and when asked in a referendum about their preferences on European vs. national sovereignty. National sovereignty is still for large strata of the population something that we know (and think we

have control upon). European sovereignty is to some extent the unknown (and something beyond our control).

3.bis. Surveys seem systematically to underestimate this deep wave (is it because they are prepared by cosmopolitan rationalists?)

4. *The political architecture of the EU is today clearly inadequate to face serious situations.* The circuits of representation, accountability and leadership selection are still essentially national while the European circuit (European elections-European Parliament- European Commission) is still dramatically weak and politically *undermobilized* (even if from the formal institutional point of view it exists). The consequence is a double accountability/representation deficit: a) national governments are popularly accountable but their decision-making ability is seriously limited by the EU architecture and they have therefore difficulties in answering the demands of the voters; b) European institutions decide over increasingly important matters for all the people, but (*de facto*) are not accountable through Europe-wide democratic processes. The consequence is that popular dissatisfaction turns either against national governments (success of anti-establishment parties in national elections), or against Europe itself in the (only) possible way, that is referendum support for (total or partial) exit.
5. *The road to safety for the EU is very narrow.* To counteract fears and nationalizing drives of the common people there is at this moment no serious political offer in terms of Europe-wide parties, policy programs, or leaders. No one is today standing clearly for European common interests/ideals (with the exception perhaps of the head of the ECB, a technocratic figure)! There are only (weak) national defensive positions of mainstream parties trying to face at home their domestic challengers and at the European level the traditional *consociational* politics of national leaders (unendingly negotiating in the European Council to find a low minimum common denominator). An easy fight for the Boris Johnsons, Marine Le Pens, Geert Wilders, Matteo Salvinis of the continent! More of the same (with perhaps limited corrections to the Juncker plan and a little more budgetary flexibility) against the “brave new/old world” of identities, sovereignties, closed borders, fight against the big bankers. There must be someone fighting for Europe or the battle will be lost (and very quickly). Are the (phantom) European parties

(PPE, Socialists, Liberals, Greens) willing and able to raise their head (an extraordinary congress?) and propose Europe-wide policy platforms? Is there anywhere a national leader who is daring enough to behave like a European leader and stand for Europe instead of standing only for his/her country? Is there a movement of opinion expounding the good reasons (and the sentiments) for a better Union? Can such a movement become so large to make a difference? Will the European Parliament make itself felt (for instance with a true political debate, and resolutions binding the current Commission and challenging the Council)? Unless there is one or more of these responses the chances that the EU is doomed seem to me very large.

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Maurizio Cotta
University of Siena
maurizio.cotta@unisi.it